



## Research Paper

## An extended study on destination image decay of sport tourists over time

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## ABSTRACT

The dynamic nature of destination image (DI) has been widely recognized. However, studies using longitudinal repeated measures to trace image change over time are limited. The first author and her colleagues have examined the structural stability of the DI held by a group of sport tourists over a 10-month interval after attending a marathon event, by adopting a tripartite attitudinal perspective. Their study revealed a significant decay in the affective DI and conative DI, but not in the cognitive DI. The current paper serves as an extended study to find out: first, will the decay of affective DI and conative DI held by sport tourists persist over time? Second, what factors will influence sport tourists' DI decay over time? Three online surveys were conducted to monitor the post-event DI change of 50 non-local marathon participants over 20 months after returning from the host destination. GLM Repeated Measures Analyses revealed that the post-event affective DI significantly declined in the first 10 months, but then rebounded in the following 10 months, while the conative DI showed a continuous decline over the 20 months. Furthermore, the change pattern of conative DI was moderated by the psychological connection level that a sport tourist has with the host destination. Relevant theoretical and managerial implications are addressed to provide insights for both researchers and practitioners.

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## 1. Introduction

Increasingly more tourist destinations are bidding for sport events and utilizing these events to improve awareness and image, and compete for a share of the profitable tourism market (Grix, 2012). Moreover, both academia and practitioners have recognized that sport event tourists have great potential to become sightseers (Nogawa, Yamaguchi, & Hagi, 1996). However, limited research has utilized the tourism perspective to understand how sport event tourists, as individual travelers consuming event destinations, perceive a destination (Davies & Williment, 2008). In addition, whether the image that sport event tourists form toward a host destination persists over time, and what factors influence their destination image change remain under researched.

Academics have recognized that destination image (DI) is not static but changes (e.g., Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Gallarza, Saura, & García, 2002; Gartner, 1986; Kim & Morrisson, 2005), and this dynamic nature is extremely important for marketing destinations given that each image form is a manageable instrument (Gallarza

et al., 2002). Although limited, there are still several studies that have been conducted on tracing destination image changes. Some examine the role of an event or accident in modifying a destination's existing image (e.g., Gartner & Shen, 1992; Kim & Morrisson, 2005; Richards & Wilson, 2004); some focus on the function of actual travel experiences in changing tourists' initial image, by comparing their post-trip and pre-trip images (e.g., Yilmaz, Yilmaz, İçgen, Ekin, & Utku, 2009), or by comparing the image held by visitors and non-visitors towards the same destination (e.g., Andreu, Bigné, & Cooper, 2001; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999a). Other studies have been concerned about changing a negative/biased DI through advertising or other promotional activities (e.g., Perry, Izraeli, & Perry, 1976; Tasci & Holecsek, 2007).

However, there are very few studies which trace actual changes to individuals' DI over time. As Gallarza et al. (2002, p.61) argue, the correct way of assessing the influence of time on DI change 'should not be the comparisons of different samples, but longitudinal sampling studies'. Although this kind of research is difficult in tourism, King, Chen, and Funk (2012) conducted a two-wave longitudinal panel study to track the changes of sport tourists' post-event DI over time, by using a tripartite attitudinal approach (i.e., "cognitive", "affective", and "conative"). Their study revealed a significant decay of DI over a 10-month period, and found that the three components of DI underwent different types

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of changes. Affective and conative components of DI were more susceptible to change while cognitive DI was stable over time due to its factual base. Seeing that the relatively short monitoring interval (10 months) used by King et al. (2012) may have limited the research findings, the current paper extends their study to further examine their results, and to explore the influential factors of DI stability more deeply.

Accordingly, this study tracks the decay of sport tourists' DI over a longer time period, and investigates the factors which may influence this DI decay over time. A longitudinal panel study approach is adopted because of its special advantages in revealing attitude changes in the same group of individuals over time, to address the following two research questions:

**RQ1.** *Will the decay of post-event DI held by sport tourists persist over time?*

**RQ2.** *What factors will influence sport tourists' DI decay over time?*

The paper is divided into four sections. First, a detailed review of the literature on DI components and DI change is conducted to highlight the research gaps. Further, the review of attitude change studies provides support for examining DI change within a theoretical framework of attitude formation and change. From this review five hypotheses are derived. Second, the research methods employed are detailed. Third, the results are presented and discussed. Finally, conclusions about theoretical and managerial implications are presented, as well as limitations of the research and directions for future research.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Destination image and its tripartite structure

The conceptualization of the image construct, as the basis for destination image research, has received extensive academic attention since the 1970s. Researchers have proposed a number of definitions, comprising various components and dimensions, which aim to capture the dynamic and complex nature of DI (Gallarza et al., 2002). Although there is a lack of consensus as to the components of DI among its various definitions, two components, the “cognitive” and “affective” images, have been widely accepted by researchers from various disciplines (e.g., Baloglu & McCleary, 1999a; Chon, 1991; Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2006; Lin, Morais, Kerstetter, & Hou, 2007; Martin & Rodriguez del Bosque, 2008; Millar & Tesser, 1989; Stern & Krakover, 1993; Walmsley & Young, 1998; Yilmaz et al., 2009). The cognitive image, as defined by Baloglu and McCleary (1999a), represents individuals' beliefs and knowledge about a destination or its attributes, while the affective image refers to individuals' emotional feeling and evaluations about a destination in terms of its strengths and weaknesses. The cognitive and affective images, although distinct, are interrelated: the cognitive image is the basis of and constitutes the resource for the formation of the affective image (Anand, Holbrook & Stephens, 1988; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999a; Gartner, 1994; Stern & Krakover, 1993).

Adopting these cognitive and affective dimensions, Gartner (1994) further explored the relationship between image and behavior, and subsequently developed the image concept by adding a third component, the “conative image”. The conative image is a behavioral component that is formed based on the cognitive and affective evaluation of a destination; it is also a transition from the image stage to a decision-making stage that involves the possibility that tourists will visit or revisit the destination (Gartner, 1994). Following the same line of thought, this paper adopts the definition developed by King et al. (2012, p.4), considering DI as ‘an interactive construct of objective knowledge, subjective impressions, prejudice,

imaginings and emotional thoughts toward a destination, held by individuals, which will influence their behavioral intentions’. This definition integrates the attitude theory with image conceptualization, dividing DI into three structural components—cognition, affect, and conation.

The tripartite structure of DI (cognitive, affective, and conative DI) is considered a comprehensive and reliable model to evaluate tourist destination image, due to its attitudinal perspective (King et al., 2012; Li & Kaplanidou, 2011; Tapachai & Waryszak, 2000; Tasci, Gartner, & Cavusgil, 2007; White, 2004). In tourism studies, the term of “destination attitude” is habitually used interchangeably with “destination image” (White, 2004, 2005), and the tripartite attitude structure is believed to provide a distinct perspective for examining tourists' behavioral intentions (Bassili, 1996). According to Bagozzi, Tybout, Craig, and Sternthal (1979), these three attitudinal components are obtained through separate learning processes that always involve the effect of persuasive communication. These components could be differentially sensitive to the persuasive communications, and in turn may generate different behavioral outcomes, leading to “three different explanations of attitude formation and change” (King et al., 2012).

Despite the importance of the tripartite structural perspective, empirical studies adopting this approach to assess DI are limited, let alone research examining the stability of DI's tripartite structure over time (King et al., 2012). Following King et al.'s research, the current extended study examines this gap by using the tripartite structural approach to examine the change of sport tourists' post-event DI over an extended period after their event participation.

### 2.2. DI change over time and its structural stability

DI change can scarcely be separated from DI formation as the two processes are intertwined and evolve constantly (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Gartner, 1994). According to Gartner (1994), image formation and change involve a continuous process that is based on a selection of a few impressions from among a number of impressions. Through this process, an image is induced and then experiences a continuous change due to the availability of new information, such as through the experience of visiting the destination. Gunn (1972), in his imagery modification framework, also states that travelers' images of a destination continue to form, change, and re-form throughout all seven stages of the travel decision-making cycle. At the beginning, travelers accumulate initial mental images about a potential destination from various information sources and their previous vacation experiences. When more information is accessed, the initial DI is modified and this modified DI leads to a decision to take a vacation trip. After a personal visit to the chosen destination, the images held by travelers are modified again and a new round of image accumulation starts. It is worth noting that this newly formed DI based on actual visit experiences is not the end of the process of DI formation and change. Because with the passage of time, or due to changing circumstances, the newly formed DI can become a new “input” factor entering the next re-formation and change cycle. Thus, the DI formation and change process should be viewed as a constant cyclic progression. As a result of this cyclic process, three types of DI can emerge: “initial DI” (an awareness present before visiting the destination); “modified-induced DI” (a result of personal experience with the destination); and “re-formed DI” (a view formed over time after visitation and evaluation against the modified-induced image). The current study focuses on the structural stability of the re-formed DI over time.

Existing research on DI formation and change mostly adopts a cross-sectional approach, focusing on how one static form of DI forms and changes. For example, research interest in pre-visit DI

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